

March 27, 2025

Office of the Auditor,
City and County of Denver



2024 Annual Wage Theft Report



Timothy M. O'Brien, CPA, Denver Auditor



Auditor's Letter



March 27, 2025

Denver's wage accountability efforts expanded in 2024 to better protect our city's residents. My team and I are proud to have helped more workers and advocated for important new legislation, achieving significant results on behalf of those we serve.

As required by city ordinance, we issue an annual wage report by the end of March, summarizing our work, results, and impacts from the previous year. I am pleased to present the 2024 Annual Wage Theft Report.

In our 2024 reporting year, our wage teams assisted both workers and employers in building a stronger economy that benefits everyone. This report provides a detailed overview of Denver Labor's successes in deterring wage theft, alleviating poverty, and promoting fair competition through comprehensive wage and hour enforcement. Our 2024 Annual Wage Theft Report also shares information about our exemplary team, the office's efforts for everyone who cares about the city, and our commitment to open communication with all members of our diverse community.

In 2024, Denver Labor assisted more people than ever before. We closed more than 750 cases, with 4,505

workers receiving money they were owed and setting a record of \$2,070,153.02 in restitution. We advocated for thousands of workers' rights in high-risk wage theft industries such as gig staffing and strip clubs. Additionally, I commissioned the Workplace Justice Lab at Rutgers University to assess the widespread impacts of wage theft in our community. The research revealed tens of thousands of workers in the Denver metro area are paid below minimum wage each year — indicating a pressing need for Denver Labor to secure more resources to address this injustice.

Our team of analysts investigates 100% of wage complaints. We audited more than 100,000 payroll records for the first time in our history, attended nearly 40 community events, updated internal policies and procedures, and conducted extensive rulemaking and stakeholder engagement. Through outreach, education, and investigation, we worked with both employers

and workers to ensure that everyone is compensated according to the law.

In a notable development for 2024, the Denver City Council unanimously passed a bill granting subpoena power for Denver Labor wage enforcement. This bill equips the Auditor's Office with the means to obtain information from private employers who do not voluntarily cooperate during wage theft investigations. Subpoena power is a necessary conflict resolution tool allowing us to pursue faster resolutions and payments for workers while minimizing the burden on businesses.

During the first year of implementation, we issued four wage enforcement subpoenas. Our work with this new tool is just beginning.

Every day, those who make Denver great are denied their basic rights to be paid the minimum wage, earn overtime, take paid rest breaks, accrue paid sick leave, and receive just compensation for honest work. They are denied hundreds of millions of dollars in earned wages. In just over two years since the Denver City Council fully empowered our office to enforce workers' wage rights, the law and our work is making a substantial difference in the lives of working people.

I would like to extend my gratitude to the Mayor's Office, members of the Denver City Council, the independent Audit Committee, and the city's financial and operational managers for their support throughout the year.

As an independent agency, we serve as a tool for effective governance in the city. Your input is important to us and to other city leaders. By continuing to support our work and highlight the issues we address, you help ensure that Denver's leaders take meaningful action. Visit our website at [DenverGov.org/Auditor](https://denvergov.org/Auditor), follow us on social media, sign up for our monthly email newsletter at [DenverGov.org/AuditorNewsletter](https://denvergov.org/AuditorNewsletter), or reach out to us directly at Auditor@DenverGov.org to share your thoughts, concerns, or questions. You can also read this Annual Report in Spanish on our website.



Timothy M. O'Brien, CPA, Denver Auditor





Wage theft and why it matters



Denver Auditor Timothy M. O'Brien and Labor Compliance Analyst Tyler Borchers inform a worker about the new minimum wage taking effect on January 1, 2024.

WHEN AND HOW WAGE THEFT HAPPENS

Wage theft occurs whenever a worker is denied the wages or benefits to which they are legally entitled under local, state, or federal law, or any applicable contracts, rules, regulations, or enforceable standards. Common examples include:

- **Minimum wage violations:** When employers do not pay workers at least Denver's minimum wage for every hour worked (\$17.29 per hour in 2023, \$18.29 per hour in 2024, and \$18.81 as of Jan. 1, 2025).
- **Overtime violations:** When employees are not paid at least one and a half times their regular rate of pay for time worked beyond 12 hours in a day or 40 hours in a workweek.
- **Prevailing wage violations:** When employers working on publicly funded construction projects or service contracts do not pay the required prevailing wages.
- **Paid sick and safe leave violations:** When employers do not allow employees to earn at least one hour of paid sick and safe leave for every 30 hours of work, or when they refuse to allow employees to use accrued paid leave as required by law.
- **Rest break violations:** When employees do not receive at least a 10-minute rest break for every four hours of work or extra compensation in place of a break.
- **Independent contractor misclassification:** When employers misclassify workers as independent contractors, rather than employees, and use this classification to deny them the rights described above.

Denver Labor enforces these rights and more. In addition, Denver Labor protects workers from retaliation when they ask about, discuss, or otherwise assert their wage-based rights.

THE PERSONAL AND SOCIETAL COSTS OF WAGE THEFT

Wage theft is pervasive and has significant effects. Its most frequent victims are the working poor, who both need money the most and are least able to enforce their rights. Across America, wage theft affects millions of workers, reduces personal incomes by thousands per year, and collectively costs low-wage workers billions in unpaid earnings. These impacts also hold true in Denver.

As a crime, wage theft does not affect all people equally. Nonunion workers, people of color, women, younger workers, those with limited formal education, and workers with an irregular immigration status are more susceptible to abuse than others and far more likely to have their wages stolen.

Wage theft also starves key social safety net programs — including unemployment, Medicare, and Social Security — of crucial funding. Experts estimate that in Colorado alone, wage theft results in lost contributions of more than \$12 million to the state's unemployment fund each year.

When people who live paycheck to paycheck are denied their earned wages, they face unfair choices between paying rent or purchasing food, prioritize the heating bill or the water bill, or even whether to get healthcare treatment when sick or injured. It is no surprise that low-income victims of wage theft often describe powerful feelings of anger, depression, and hopelessness when their rights are violated.

Wage theft's harms reverberate beyond the people who experience it. It deprives families, neighborhoods, and communities of an alarming amount of money.

Poverty is related to a wide range of evils, including shorter lifespans, health problems, increased rates of eviction, and dangerous neighborhoods. Recognizing the link between wage theft and the ills of poverty, public health experts argue wage theft is itself a threat to public health.

Given the evidence, we are committed to curbing wage theft and protecting the people we serve.

Are you owed money?

Auditor O'Brien wants to make sure workers receive the wages they are owed according to the law. If you were underpaid at work, Denver Labor might have a restitution check waiting for you. Check for your name on our website: [DenverGov.org/DenverLabor](https://denvergov.org/denverlabor).



The leadership of Denver Labor photographed outside the McNichols Civic Center building. From left to right: Director of Denver Labor Rafael Gongón, Denver Auditor Timothy M. O'Brien, and Executive Director of Denver Labor Matthew Fritz-Mauer.



Denver Labor's work in 2024

DENVER LABOR'S MISSION

Denver Labor aims to protect Denver's workers and employers and ensure everyone is paid according to the law. The division is responsible for enforcing three city laws:

- The **Minimum Wage** Ordinance.
- The **Civil Wage Theft** Ordinance.
- The **Prevailing Wage** Ordinance.

Civil wage theft includes any denial of lawfully earned wages.

Denver Labor has three work groups: Two work groups primarily enforce the Prevailing Wage Ordinance, while the third enforces Denver's Minimum Wage and Civil Wage Theft ordinances. In addition, Denver Labor employs two policy analysts and contract administrator. Denver Labor is led by a director and executive director.

When Denver Labor conducts wage theft investigations, our analysts:

- **Receive** a complaint or begin a proactive enforcement investigation.
- **Assess** the complaint to ensure it meets initial investigation requirements.
- **Contact** the employer to request worker, payroll, and compliance documentation.
- **Evaluate** the complaint to consider all information provided by any complainant and the employer.
- **Determine** underpayments, fines, and damages and inform both parties of any restitution that might be required.
- **Resolve** the complaint.

Once the employer provides evidence of a completed restitution payment, the case is closed. If no restitution was required, then the case will be closed. When there is not sufficient evidence of restitution paid, the case may be referred to another agency for investigation or to an outside firm to collect restitution.

NEW RESEARCH

Denver's wage protections cover every worker of every income level in the City and County of Denver. However, Auditor O'Brien commissioned new research showing tens of thousands of workers in the Denver metro area are paid below a legal wage each year. The study released by the Workplace Justice Lab@Rutgers University in 2024 suggests that between 2007 and 2022, underpaid workers lost at least \$136 million a year, or nearly \$3,000 per worker. But this number only includes minimum wage violations and not the broader range of wage theft violations.

The research confirmed our understanding that women, noncitizens, and people of color are more likely to experience minimum wage theft. It also shows minimum wage violation rates are highest in private households, food services and drinking places, personal and laundry services, accommodation roles, retail trade, and administrative support — all industries Denver Labor has prioritized and investigated.



Restitution for workers

RECOVERING UNPAID WAGES

During our 2024 reporting year, Denver Labor recovered a record amount in restitution for a record number of workers, exceeding previous high totals set in 2023. In 2024, the total amount we recovered was \$2,070,153 for 4,505 people.

Worker restitution includes three types of compensation: unpaid wages, damages, and interest.

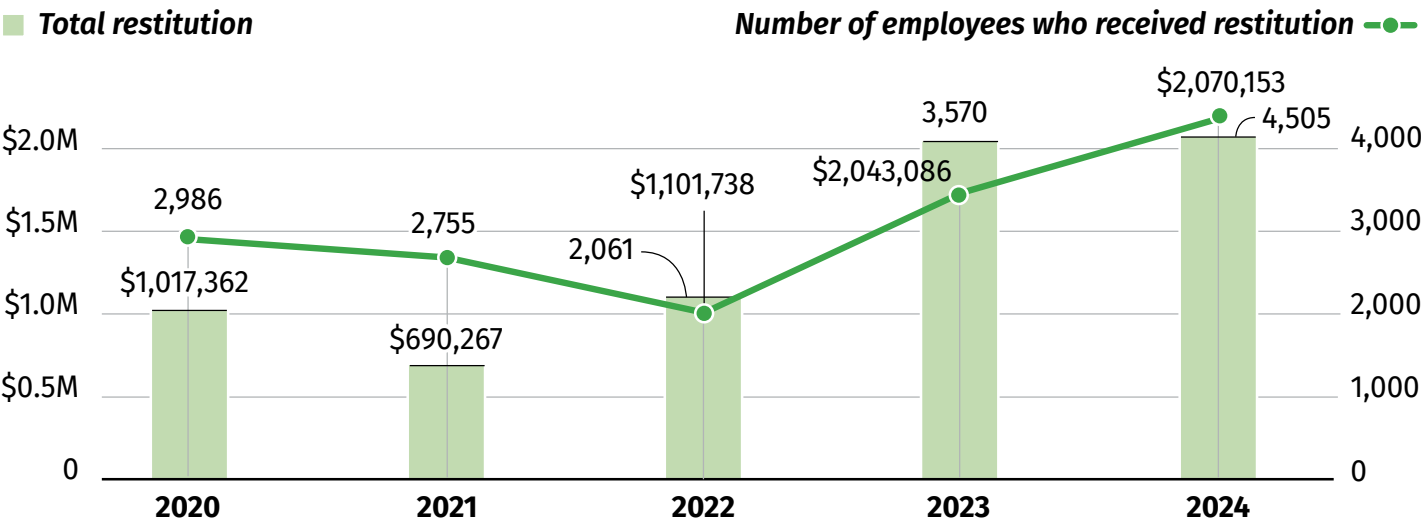
In many cases, Denver Labor collects 200% of unpaid wages as damages. In every case, Denver Labor recovers unpaid wages and applies 12% annual interest from the date those wages were first owed. All restitution compensates workers who have been harmed by wage theft.

RESTITUTION SPOTLIGHT

One of our largest cases in 2024 involved Urban Peak, a nonprofit in Denver that built a new facility to serve as its headquarters and provide wraparound services for homeless youth. Denver’s taxpayers loaned Urban Peak almost \$17 million for this project, and in return, Urban Peak agreed to follow Denver’s Prevailing Wage Ordinance.

Urban Peak misclassified this project as “residential” construction, rather than “building” construction. Because residential rates are significantly lower than building rates, we disputed the classification and determined workers were being underpaid. A hearing officer agreed with us and we collected \$356,309.82 for 202 workers. This work is ongoing, and we are still collecting restitution for this project.

Our office is dedicated to strategic enforcement, a proactive approach that emphasizes long-term, systemic enforcement and compliance across numerous industries.





Gig workers' rights

A CHANGING ECONOMY

In recent years, we have seen a dramatic shift toward gig economy work and a rise in the number of gig workers. Gig work usually involves flexible or temporary work assignments performed by workers classified as independent contractors. However, many of these workers are really employees entitled to workplace protections guaranteed by Colorado and Denver law.

Such misclassification hurts both workers and law-abiding businesses. For decades, Colorado's law-abiding staffing firms have paid the minimum wage and overtime, provided paid sick leave, ensured workers' compensation coverage, and paid their share of taxes.

In the last few years, the staffing industry has come under attack by gig staffing companies that undercut legitimate businesses by misclassifying employees as independent contractors.

Across Denver, low-wage workers laboring as dishwashers, bartenders, servers, and warehouse associates are denied the right to minimum wage, overtime, paid sick leave, and more. Violating these laws allows these gig companies to save an extraordinary amount of money on wages, benefits, and taxes. And, in turn, they are able to gain an unfair competitive advantage, and offer clients low prices fueled by wage theft.

Denver Labor has uncovered widespread violations of workers' rights. For example, in August 2024 we issued a determination against gig staffing app Instawork, finding that it had misclassified almost 3,000 workers and violated Denver law tens of thousands of times. Our investigation found widespread minimum wage, overtime, and paid sick leave violations. We ordered Instawork to pay restitution of almost \$200,000, and imposed fines of about \$2.3 million. The entire wage determination is [available on our website](#).

Other investigations in 2024 resulted in settlements collecting tens of thousands of dollars in lost wages that benefited hundreds of workers.

These investigations demonstrate our commitment to serving Denver's workers, employers, and the whole community.

By conducting proactive, targeted investigations, Denver Labor protects all stakeholder interests.

Getting results

A worker used a gig app and was hired to serve concessions at an Empower Field at Mile High concert, but she was underpaid. After she contacted us, we investigated her case, and helped her recover \$300 in owed money and another \$600 in interest and penalties.



Subpoena power

A NEW ENFORCEMENT TOOL

On April 20, 2024, Denver City Council entrusted the Denver Auditor's Office with subpoena power for wage investigations. A subpoena is a formal written order requiring an employer or person to produce specific records or documents. This is a crucial enforcement tool. Sometimes, employers refuse to provide information that Denver Labor requires for its investigations. This could include employee handbooks, policies, payroll records, and contracts.

Before we had subpoena power, our remedies for employer stonewalling were limited. We could impose a \$1,000 fine if employers refused to turn over payroll records, but that amount was often too small to incentivize cooperation by employers.

In the summer of 2023, Auditor O'Brien began to engage with city councilmembers and dozens of stakeholder groups to explain the need for subpoena power. After a months-long successful campaign in collaboration with councilmembers Amanda Sawyer, Sarah Parady, and more than a dozen community organizations, the City Council unanimously granted Denver Labor subpoena power.

This new law strikes a balance between the interests of employers and the needs of our office. Employers have the right to challenge subpoenas, at no cost, before a neutral, third-party hearing officer. However, if employers do not comply with Denver Labor's reasonable demands, they face fines of up to \$1,000 per day until they turn over their records.

We have already begun using this tool. For example, we issued subpoenas to four strip clubs that refused to turn over basic, work-related information about the entertainers who work there. These clubs challenged these subpoenas and lost — more than once. Thanks to the tireless work of Councilmember Sawyer, Councilmember Parady, and the community organizations that support Denver Labor's work, we will be able to get the information we need to enforce these workers' rights.

We anticipate subpoenas will allow us to open new investigations, uncover more cases of wage theft, and help collect more restitution for workers.



First subpoenas

While proactively investigating three strip clubs for wage theft (Diamond Cabaret, PT's Showclub, and PT's Centerfold), we issued subpoenas seeking documents. The clubs challenged the subpoenas and claimed they were overly burdensome, sought confidential information, and fell outside of Denver Labor's authority. A hearing officer upheld our authority to issue subpoenas. Their order is [available on our website](#).



Results in 2024



Chris Rubio, Lead Labor Compliance Analyst, center, and Jay Digiorgio, Labor Compliance Analyst, right, inform a Denver employee about current minimum wage figures and wage theft laws.

A PRODUCTIVE YEAR

Denver Labor's 2024 reporting year was the most impactful in the division's history. New staff and legal authority allowed us to help more workers and recover more money than ever before. Around 75% of our investigations begin with people contacting us, which emphasizes the importance of employees alerting us to wage issues in their workplace.

By the numbers

CATEGORY	2022	2023	2024
Restitution recovered	\$1,101,738	\$2,043,086	\$2,070,153
Workers helped	2,061	3,570	4,505
Cases closed	454	586	753
Penalties issued	\$155,277	\$31,232.58	\$4,549,973
Average restitution per worker	\$534.56	\$572.29	\$459.52
Payroll records audited as part of prevailing wage enforcement	85,000+	96,000+	102,000+

Closed minimum wage or wage theft cases with restitution by industry in 2024

INDUSTRY (North American Industry Classification System code)	Number of closed cases with restitution	Total restitution
Restaurants and other eating places (7225)	12	\$192,207.53
Personal care services, including salons (8121)	5	\$177,388.31
Other support services, including gig apps (5619)	3	\$150,865.12
Building finishing contractors (2383)	1	\$57,165.20
Management, scientific, and technical consulting services (5416)	2	\$45,008.62
Accounting, tax preparation, bookkeeping, and payroll services (5412)	1	\$36,000.00

When we investigate wage theft, common mistakes we identify include businesses claiming the tip credit when they should not, businesses thinking they are outside Denver’s boundary when they are not, and businesses paying a wage based on the employer’s office location instead of where the work was done. In each of these situations in 2024, we recovered restitution for employees. Overall, \$2,070,153 was returned to 4,505 employees, both records for our office.

Our investigations cover various industries and employee types. The top three largest restitution cases demonstrate how our team navigates different situations and works with employers to reach a positive result:

Denver Labor recovers \$120,867 for nail salon workers
We opened an active enforcement investigation for a nail salon. After reviewing payroll records, we found the company was paying strictly commissions and tips and were not tracking how many hours its employees had worked. We educated the business on adequate record keeping and how to comply with Denver’s minimum wage. As a result, we recovered \$120,867.91 for 16 employees.

Restaurant workers recover \$81,673 after tipped credit miscalculation
We received a webform complaint about a local restaurant not paying the correct minimum wage for tipped employees. We educated the employer on how to calculate the tip credit for each qualified position since the Citywide Minimum Wage Ordinance came into effect. The employer worked with us to correct the violation and we recovered \$81,763.46 for 18 employees.

Higher-level contractor returns \$61,283 to workers after applying the “up-the-chain accountability” approach
Workers who did not receive pay for overtime while completing work for a construction company reached out to us. We contacted a higher-level contractor and educated them about the Civil Wage Theft Ordinance and the up-the-chain accountability approach. The higher-level contractor understood its responsibilities based on the ordinance and returned \$61,283.25 to 33 employees.

These cases represent a fraction of the work the entire Denver Labor division performs. Other restitution stories are on our website at [DenverGov.org/Restitution](https://denvergov.org/restitution).

Denver Labor continues growing to keep up with increasing wage theft complaints we receive. More workers are discovering what our office can do for underpaid employees. We are encouraged our outreach is making a difference for wage theft victims.



Community connections



Chris Wat, Labor Compliance Analyst, right, takes down information from construction workers at the Denver International Airport.

CONNECTING WITH WORKERS

Wage theft is a persistent, socially corrosive problem. Therefore, city government must be equally persistent in finding and addressing violations of workers' rights.

In 2024, our approach to enforcement included several important strategies:

- Using cutting-edge empirical research to identify high-risk industries, and then proactively investigating them. These industries included bars and restaurants, nail salons, home health care operations, construction sites, and gig staffing agencies.
- Conducting employer-wide investigations when receiving complaints that indicate systemic problems.
- Working closely with community organizations, including nonprofits, labor unions, registered neighborhood organizations, and trade and industry groups.

- Collaborating with other government agencies to share information and conduct strategic enforcement.
- Accepting complaints from third parties and anonymous individuals.
- Publicizing key determinations and naming bad actors.
- Attending dozens of events each year to engage with the community.

These efforts make a difference.

Through our community engagement, we learned about wage violations and connected with workers who would otherwise not have filed a complaint with us. As a result, our 2024 reporting year saw significant increases in the number of workers we helped, the number of cases we closed after finding violations, and the amount of money we recovered for workers.

WHAT DOES OUTREACH LOOK LIKE?

Denver Labor has a wide set of community outreach initiatives it uses to raise awareness of wage rights and wage responsibilities for both workers and employers.

We have educational programs, community partnerships, local event participation, and training sessions. We actively share and promote advocacy efforts happening at the neighborhood level which strengthen our community and protect against wage theft.

We clearly communicate our impact and value in an accessible and inclusive manner. We provide materials in multiple languages and conduct live training sessions in both English and Spanish. We use plain language and communicate with our audience in mind. We want our most vulnerable populations and highest-risk industries to know their rights and feel comfortable coming to us for information.

Denver Labor uses visual media which includes graphics, pictures, and video. Our ongoing video series, “Wages Wednesday,” features monthly live Facebook training sessions about wage enforcement. Over the past year, we have reached hundreds of thousands of people through digital platforms, radio, television, newspapers, and printed media projects.

Our outreach also includes print and digital marketing. We use advertisements in English and Spanish to tell the public about the current minimum wage. The ads also encourage people who are harmed by wage theft to contact our office. An example of one of these ads from 2024 is on this page (note: the minimum wage in 2025 is \$18.81/hour).

We value meeting face-to-face with residents, whether it is at a small neighborhood meeting or a large community event. We do construction site visits to talk with employees about prevailing wage rates, and we visit businesses to educate workers and employers about wage rates. Every touchpoint is critical and leads to greater awareness of wage laws.

We are proud of our accomplishments and will continue to grow our outreach initiatives and collaborations to serve our community and promote fair labor practices.



Staff members managing a booth during 2024 Global Fest, informing the public about the work of the Denver Auditor's Office and Denver Labor.



A digital ad from the 2024 Denver Minimum Wage campaign.



Media coverage and social media



Denver Auditor Timothy M. O'Brien during the taping of an "Ask the Auditor" video.

GETTING THE WORD OUT

Clear communication is essential for Denver Labor. It helps workers understand their rights. It also discourages employers from violating wage laws by informing them of potential consequences and promotes best practices across various industries by educating both employees and employers.

In 2024, Denver Labor continued its commitment to engaging with the public through traditional and social media, providing information in both English and Spanish.

NEWS MEDIA COVERAGE

Throughout the year, we tracked at least 56 news stories in local media involving Denver Labor. These stories resulted from our ongoing institutional relationships with the media and the sharing of relevant and valuable information for our diverse audiences.

News coverage spanned numerous outlets, including CBS Colorado, Denver7, 9News, FOX31, Telemundo, Univision, KGNU, City Cast Denver, Denver Business Journal, Denver Post, Denver Gazette, Colorado Sun, Westword, Denverite, The Center Square, Staffing Industry Analysts, Hoodline, Latin Times, and El Comercio de Colorado.

Notable news headlines

- [Denver Post](#): "Denver subpoenas 3 strip clubs in first use of new tool to investigate wage theft"
- [Westword](#): "Urban Peak Accused of Wage Theft During Construction of New Homeless Shelter"
- [Colorado Sun](#): "Gig workers are employees, Denver auditor says as city seeks more than \$1 million in penalties"
- [9News](#): "Denver recovers record amount in restitution for minimum wage workers"

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media enables direct and transparent interaction with the public, allowing individuals to ask questions about labor rights, receive updates on the city’s wage policies, and engage in meaningful conversations with us.

This open line of communication raises awareness about fair wage practices, supports advocacy for legal compensation, and empowers workers to express their concerns. Ultimately, our direct engagement fosters a more informed public and builds trust between government and the workforce in Denver by providing a platform for timely and accessible communication on wage rights and other important issues related to work and income regulations.

Some of our more popular posts in 2024:

- [Nextdoor](#): We joined the mayor for the Denver Labor subpoena power bill signing.
- [Nextdoor](#): Denver Labor issued a subpoena to strip clubs for misclassifying their workers.
- [Facebook](#): Successful collaboration between the Mexican Consulate and Denver Labor to assist an underpaid worker.
- [Instagram](#): Are you owed money?
- [X](#): Gig staffing companies’ failure to provide legally required sick leave may compel workers, such as those serving food and drinks or cleaning hotel rooms, to work when they are ill.
- [X](#): Denver’s labor representatives attended the Adelante Latina Convention to support our community outreach efforts aimed at educating Latina businesswomen about Denver’s wage laws.
- [LinkedIn](#): A video of our prevailing wage team’s work at Denver International Airport ensuring all workers involved with airport projects receive the correct pay.



A still from the “Ask the Auditor – Employee misclassification” video of Denver Auditor Timothy M. O'Brien.



From left to right: Communications Specialists Stelios Pavlou and Sara del Valle Ruiz; Communications Director Michael Brannen; Communications Specialists Rocio Arnaz, Manda Troutman, and Jeff Neumann.

Social media posts in 2024	Facebook: 291	Instagram: 226	X: 176	LinkedIn: 50	Nextdoor: 28
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The broader context



Denver Auditor Timothy M. O'Brien, right, and members of Denver Labor, before heading out to inform 16th Street Mall businesses about minimum wage and wage theft.

SEEKING JUSTICE FOR WORKERS

Denver Labor's 2024 results exist in context with the social impacts of economic insecurity and access to justice.

Most workers who come through our doors are members of the working class, and many have low incomes. Low-wage workers frequently experience wage theft, and often say they find it frustrating, unfair, and demeaning. At the same time, they rarely take formal legal action to assert their rights because many fear retaliation, do not know how to bring a legal claim, lack the time to pursue a claim, or feel legal action will not do any good. These findings reflect a troubling fact: Many — if not most — workers do not believe the government can or will protect their basic civil rights.

Denver Labor seeks to change this belief through our relentless dedication in seeking justice for workers who have been robbed of wages they are owed and in ensuring all businesses comply with the law.

However, and more broadly, access to justice is at a crisis point in the United States and Colorado. Most people in America experience at least one civil legal problem each year. Often, these involve basic — and crucially important — needs like housing and employment.

According to our state's Access to Justice Commission:

On any given day, thousands of Coloradans face unresolved civil legal issues. These can have devastating personal consequences when daunting barriers prevent them from being effectively, efficiently, and equitably resolved. For particularly marginalized populations, these barriers are especially destabilizing and compounding.

Denver Labor sees these dynamics play out every day. Workers regularly tell our investigators how the theft of their hard-earned wage makes it significantly more difficult for them to live and thrive in Denver. This is especially troubling because, for decades, researchers have understood that the working poor are the least likely to bring legal claims because access to legal recourse is severely limited.

In 2023, the City and County of Denver recognized these problems and strove to create meaningful solutions. The City Council passed the Civil Wage Theft Ordinance and the mayor and the City Council ensured they invested in this enforcement.

Our efforts make a real difference both for Denver’s workers and residents and for addressing access to justice. On average, Denver Labor collected about \$460 per worker in 2024. To some, this may not be a great deal of money. But to the workers we serve, it is extremely important: these recovered wages represent rent, groceries, utilities, car payments, medical bills, and other necessities of modern life. For many, it also represents vindication and justice; it is confirmation that they and their rights matter.

As important as these unpaid wages are to the people who earned them, the amounts that we recover are often too small to justify individual legal action. Attorneys are unlikely to bring a case involving only a few hundred dollars, and free or low-cost civil legal services are extremely limited in Colorado. For many workers, filing a lawsuit themselves is out of the question. The legal process can be confusing and difficult to navigate, and many people lack faith that seeking legal remedies is worth it.

Exacerbating these problems is the fact that many workers have given up their right to access the courts and join together to pursue justice. Across the country, more than 60 million workers have signed mandatory arbitration agreements stopping them from filing a complaint in court — even small claims court — and prohibiting them from joining class-action lawsuits.

Restitution for workers represents vindication and justice; confirmation for these workers that they and their rights matter.



Chris Wat, Labor Compliance Analyst, left, and a Denver worker, left, who is holding a poster announcing the 2024 minimum wage rate.

Never has there been a greater need for proactive, data-driven government enforcement of civil rights. While much wage theft involves relatively small amounts of money — often less than \$100 — workers’ rights matter. So too do their violations.

When the government can comprehensively address widespread acts of wage theft, those small amounts of money can add up to hundreds, thousands, or hundreds of thousands of dollars — and result in the vindication of the core rights guaranteed by Denver and Colorado’s system of wage and hour laws.

With the authority empowered by Denver’s Civil Wage Theft Ordinance, Denver Labor can aid workers, support the interests of well-meaning employers, and protect all the city’s residents and workers — of all income levels — to ensure they receive the wages they earned according to law.



The staff of the Denver Labor Division.

LOOKING AHEAD

For many people the government is their last, best, and only hope for wage justice. Too many barriers prevent workers from successfully asserting their rights, making it unreasonable to expect workers to speak up in critical numbers. Today, it is vital for Denver's city leaders and agencies to be proactive, creative, and closely partner with community organizations, industry representatives, and advocates in defense of those in our community who most need help.

The Denver Auditor's Office made significant progress in enforcing Denver's wage ordinances in 2024. We are continuing this progress into 2025 and stand committed to ensuring Denver's laws protect against wage injustice.

Denver Labor managers

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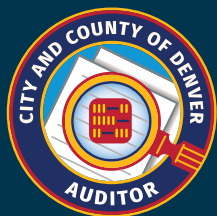
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